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Global Warming and the Political Ecology of Health. Emerging Crises and Systemic Solutions, by Hans Baer and Merrill Singer.

This is the author's own version of the review published in:

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Global Warming and the Political Ecology of Health. Emerging Crises and Systemic Solutions by Hans Baer and Merrill Singer. (Volume 1, Advances in Medical Anthropology Series, ed. by Merrill Singer and Pamela Erickson). Walnut Creek: Left Coast Press, 2009. Pp. 238; index. £ 54.50 (hardback); £ 26.55 (paperback). ISBN 978-1-59874-353-1 and ISBN 978-1-59874-354-8

In my view, this book makes two significant contributions to ethical debates on global warming. Firstly, it provides an impressive array of evidence on the manifold ways in which global warming presents new, and exacerbates existing health challenges. In doing so, it helps to make a convincing case for the urge to develop radical strategies, emphasising the need for much greater efforts at mitigation. Secondly, the claim is made that global capitalism carries the blame for the increasing social inequalities that are associated with climate change, and that it therefore must be replaced by a new political system. While this point is not new, the authors do a good job in summarising prominent alternatives, and sketch ‘global democratic ecosocialism’, their favoured system.

As anthropologists, Baer and Singer are inspired by the social epidemiologist Peter Townsend, who argued over two decades ago that the promotion of social equality is paramount to improve human health. In the authors’ own words: ‘exacting life conditions are the product of structural barriers from which the privileged directly benefit’ (p. 145). They add that, since the environmental costs of capitalism are distributed unequally, new structures must incorporate environmental justice. While this is convincing, I am less persuaded by the claim that ‘anthropology has a unique contribution to make ... (as it)

focuses upon the holistic study of human societies' (p. 13), even if it is clear that we can learn a lot from other cultures. However, the authors' anthropological lens lends itself well to exploring how climate change is already affecting some of the world's most marginalised communities, including the Tuvaluans (pp. 55-57). Whilst highlighting how some relatively ignored communities have already been affected by climate change, they also sketch a number of more generic health risks that (may) affect the poorest more than anyone else. These include concerns about access to food, in relation to which the authors note that some people have adopted vegetarianism (p. 80). The possibility is ignored that some vegan diets might contribute even more towards tackling social injustice, for example by decreasing the risks of serious zoonoses such as influenzas, which the authors discuss in some detail (Chapter 5).

The authors take issue with a 'cost-benefit' analysis approach to global warming, favouring an approach that focuses on health 'consequences', yet it is unclear what these 'consequences' would be if not (admittedly more than just financial) costs (p. 67). A further problem is their definition of health in terms of 'access to ... resources' (p. 71), even if they emphasise rightly their interconnectedness. Indeed, the authors separate their ecosyndemic approach from 'traditional environmental health models' (p. 136) insofar as it emphasises the need to consider the social and ecological contexts of health, a useful corrective (even if the contrast might be somewhat overstated). Nevertheless, in their definition of 'ecosyndemic' (p. 146), the role of the ecological context is reduced inappropriately to that of 'global warming', and the fairly exclusive focus on human

health must also be regretted as the health of many organisms is affected by the ecosystemic changes that are taking place.

Chapters seven and eight are likely to be the most interesting for environmental philosophers. The former provides a good overview of prominent proposals to address climate change; the latter sketches 'global democratic ecosocialism'. The authors take issue with the inadequacy of the Kyoto Protocol, the lack of interest of major international groups in challenging capitalism, ecological modernisation's fixation on technological fixes, the dominance of neoliberal economics which exploits labour and natural resources to make profit, and the rising inequalities in access to resources between rich and poor. The alternative system would focus on satisfying needs, redistribute and increase public control over resources, and reduce consumption, waste, as well as the human population.

The book contains a significant number of spelling mistakes, and some references are missing (for example pp. 80-81). Alarmingly, the authors claim that 'air travel has been projected to double by 2015' (p. 46), yet they do not provide information of which year this is relative to. A similar problem underlies their claim that heat waves may 'double' by 2020 (p. 92). In spite of these omissions, I warmly recommend this book to anyone who takes an interest in addressing the global health challenges presented by global warming.